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Church, CIA Can't Find Note

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The Central Intelligence Agency says it cannot, for the life of it, find the letter Sen. Frank Church wrote his mother-in-law while visiting the Soviet Union in 1971.

The Senate intelligence committee can't find it either, which is unsettling since the Idaho Democrat, chairman of the committee, described it last month as a prime example of the excesses of the CIA's illegal mail-opening program.

Now that no one can find the letter, from sources close to the CIA come hints that maybe it never was intercepted, that maybe it never existed as far as the CIA's files are concerned. From spokesmen for Church and his committee come counter-suggestions that maybe the CIA destroyed its copy.

At a committee hearing Sept. 24, Church said the CIA had surreptitiously opened and copied the letter with others to and from U.S. politicians as part of the CIA's 20-year mail intercept program. Committee aides indicated that the copy had been found in a special CIA file set aside for correspondence to and from "selected American politicians."

When reporters pressed Church for their own copies, he said they would have to wait until the committee opened full-fledged hearings on the mail-opening operations of the CIA and the FBI.

Committee officials announced yesterday that at least a dozen witnesses, including former CIA Director Richard M. Helms, are being called to these hearings, scheduled for next Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday.

But neither the CIA's copy nor the original can be found. Mrs. Chase Clark, Church's mother-in-law, has told reporters in Boise she doesn't remember receiving it. And Church, according to a spokesman in his senatorial office, doesn't recall what he wrote, except that he's sure it was just chatty, inconsequential travelogue.

The senator's spokesman said that, as he understood it, the committee came across the letter on a list that the CIA had been asked to supply of individuals whose mail had been intercepted.

A spokesman for the committee, however, said it was brought to their attention, along with other letters, during staff questioning of a CIA official involved in the mail openings "who saw and remembered the letter." The list was compiled from such testimony.

But now, the spokesman added, it appears that "the files may have been destroyed."

CIA Director William E. Colby gave some support for that notion in testimony last June before a House Government Operations subcommittee headed by Rep. Bella Abzug (D-N.Y.). Colby acknowledged then that "some material" from the mail-opening project had been destroyed in 1973 following the CIA's in-house investigation of illegal and questionable practices. But Colby added in consolation that not all the evidence had been tossed out. After all, he said, the CIA did find a letter that Abzug had written.